

SCENE 6 : Final struggle, victory and judgment

1. The glorified Christ

¹¹Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.

¹²His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself.

¹³He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God.

¹⁴And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.

¹⁵From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will *shepherd* them with a rod of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.

Our eyes are rivetted upon the glorified Christ. We first encountered him upon his white horse when the first seal was opened. He 'came from victory that he might conquer'(6:2). Now heaven is completely opened:¹ we are able at last to see, clearly revealed, God's ultimate purpose and action in history. The love poured out over the world by Jesus' life-giving on the cross will conquer whatever power is exercised by the kingdoms that oppose him – kingdoms which have their origin in this world.

Most of the symbols occurring in this passage are already familiar to us. The seeing is an insight born of prayer and reflection (1:12). John is looking into heaven, that is to say, he is seeing things as God sees them (3:12). He is inviting the assembly to do the same (1:7). The horse is white (6:2), for it shares in the luminous splendour of its rider, the risen Jesus (1:14). He is Faithful (1:5; 3:14) and True (3:14). It is he who is the Judge² and who wages war against all that is evil.³ His eyes are like a flame of fire, for nothing is hidden from his purifying judgment (1:14; 2:18). He is King, with many royal crowns on his head (14:14).

John adds that the exalted Christ has a name known only to himself (2:3,17). We do not necessarily and immediately recognise the action of the risen Christ in history or the way he chooses to relate to us. We recall the following from Isaiah:

The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

– Isaiah 62:2-3

¹Compare 3:7-8; 4:1; 11:19; 15:5.

²See Psalm 9:8; 72:1-2; 96:13; Isaiah 11:4-5.

³Compare 17:14; 20:7-10.

The outer garment (3:4) of the victorious Christ is soaked in blood (5:9). We think of Jesus in his crimson robe being presented by Pilate to the Jewish authorities after being scourged and crowned with thorns (19:1-5).

He is the Word of God, God's self-revelation and self-communication to the world, and God's final word on what it means to be a human being. We are judged in reference to him: those who have obstinately resisted what he has revealed are condemned; those who have accepted his challenge and worked with him to establish the reign of God are victorious. We find similar imagery in the following texts from the Old and the New Testaments:

He made my mouth like a sharp sword.

– Isaiah 49:2

While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command.

– Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-15

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. *The word is to face us towards him.*

– Hebrews 4:12-14

Those fighting on the side of truth are wearing their wedding garments (19:7-8) and are following their risen Christ (14:14), the King of kings and Lord of Lords (17:14). It is his word ('a sharp sword', 1:16) that will win victory.¹ The wrath of God (6:16-17) has already been likened to a winepress (14:19-20, 29). John is preparing us for battle and for the victory of Christ and all those who share his mission.

¹See 2:26-27; 12:5. John is quoting Psalm 2:9.

2. The forces of evil on earth are defeated by Christ

¹⁷Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God,

¹⁸to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders - flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.¹

¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army.

²⁰And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur.

²¹And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

John has a further faith-insight from his reflection to share with his listeners ('I saw', 1:12). The herald of God's message ('angel', 7:11) is ready to carry out God's will ('standing', 7:9). Mention of the sun recalls the face of Jesus 'like the sun shining with full force' (1:16).

The revelation is intelligible and important ('loud voice', 1:10). God is summoning the vultures (18:2) to gather on the field of battle to be gorged with the flesh of those defeated in battle. John speaks of this as a supper of God, for it is the enemies of God who are completely and utterly devoured. The image comes from Ezekiel:

Speak to the birds of every kind and to all the wild animals: Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth. And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with warriors and all kinds of soldiers, says the Lord God.

– Ezekiel 39:17-20

The Roman system (the 'beast', 13:1) and those subject rulers who have allied themselves with it ('the kings of the earth', 1:5) are assembled to oppose the risen Christ and his followers.² The leader of the evil forces is defeated as is the false prophet who encouraged emperor cult (16:13). They are cast into hell ('lake of fire', 9:17). Sulphur highlights the impossibility of revival (14:10).³ The risen Christ slays them with his word (19:15) and the birds of prey gorge themselves on the field of battle.

It is not John's intention to leave us with an image of a bloodthirsty, vengeful God. The imagery is of war, because he is describing the final defeat of evil. The victorious sword, however, is the word, the revelation, of the crucified Jesus. It is non-violent love that conquers the forces of evil.

¹ Compare 6:15 and 13:16.

² See 17:12-14 and Psalm 2:2.

³ Compare Daniel 7:11; Psalm 55:15; Isaiah 30:33.

3. Evil has some influence in history, but far greater is the influence of the exalted Christ

John is contrasting the action of the risen Christ in history and the action of Evil. For a thousand years Satan is bound. It is God who binds him, as is symbolised in the angel who comes from heaven. Christ reigns supreme, and reigning with Christ are those who have given their lives for their faith, and those who have remained faithful: the martyrs and saints. By contrast, for a little while, Satan is let out and comes out to deceive the nations and gather them for battle against Christ and his saints. We are left in no doubt as to which power is superior, for Satan, like the beast and the false prophet, is totally defeated (20:10).

To grasp the meaning of this passage, we should remember that numbers in the Apocalypse are always to be interpreted symbolically: the thousand years and the little while both refer symbolically to the whole of history before the end. The thousand years refers to God's action in history considered in its totality (7:4; 14:1). It stands for the whole of history as it is influenced by the action of the transcendent God. We might compare the statement from Peter:

With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day [confer Psalm 90:4]. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

– 2Peter 3:8-10

By contrast the action of evil in history is symbolically described as a little while. This little while, too, stands for the whole of history, but this time as influenced by evil. In comparison with God's influence, it takes a minor role. The 'after' in verse three does not refer to sequence in time, but to position on the scale of importance. The power exercised by evil is insignificant when contrasted with the power exercised by Christ. It is short-lived and ultimately must come to nothing. Evil does deceive and there are those who gather to fight against Christ, but their action lacks ultimate significance and they provide no real challenge to the superior action of Christ and the certainty of his victory.

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.

²He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,

³and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended.

After that he must be let out for a little while.

4Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw *alive* those who had been beheaded for *the testimony of Jesus* and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They *lived* and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

5(The rest of the dead did not *live* until the thousand years were ended).

This is the first resurrection.

6Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection! Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.

7And *whenever* the thousand years *might end*, Satan will be released from his prison

8and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea.

9And they marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them.

10And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

This scene does not depict the final judgment, but the effective judgment of evil in history and the role played in this judgment by those followers of Christ who have died in Christ, including those who have been deprived of life because they accepted Jesus as God's word, even to giving their lives. Like Jesus they have died, but they live.

Those who have been faithful to Jesus have not worshipped the beast or its image: they did not submit to the demands of the Roman political system that organised people without reference to the God of Jesus. They did not have the mark of the beast on their foreheads: the meanings and values that determined their lives were not those of the Empire. They did not have the mark on their hands: their actions, too, did not flow from enslavement to Rome.

John imagines the resurrection, according to the thinking of his day, as awaiting the end of history. Here he speaks of the active influence of the saints and martyrs in history as being a first resurrection, reserved for those whose lives were such that they continue to have a striking influence on history (compare 11:3-13). John speaks of them as priests, for they mediate the life and action of God to us.¹

We share much the same idea. Most people die and are quickly forgotten. Those, however, like Saints Peter and Paul, or Saint Augustine, or Saint Francis of Assisi, whose outstanding holiness continues to influence us, are thought of as being well and truly active in our lives.

¹'priests of God and of Christ'. Contrast John's earlier expression: 'priests to God'(1:6; 5:10). Here those who have died and are alive with Christ share fully in the transcendent ('of God'), and so in the priestly mediation of Christ in effecting the reign of God in human history. On the priesthood of Christians who share in the mission of Christ to effect God's reign on earth, see commentary on 1:6.

The churches to whom John was writing had their saints too,¹ and John is assuring them that, while they have died, they will certainly not suffer the second death: the final and only real death. This death is forever and ever and is the end suffered by Satan, the beast and the false prophet and by all those who have obstinately opposed the reign of God on earth.²

Gog and Magog may well have had special significance for the communities of Asia Minor. Gog is probably Gyges, the first king of Lydia, called Gugu in ancient Assyrian documents. His capital was at Sardis, one of the cities to which the Apocalypse is addressed. Magog is the district of which Gog was the king.³ John uses them here as a symbol for all peoples and their leaders who violently oppose the reign of God. They are as numerous as the sands of the sea.

The armies of evil are dramatically described as marching up from the subterranean realm of the demonic to the plain of history where they lay siege to God's people.⁴ They are consumed by fire from heaven.⁵ The victory of God is definitive, simple, direct and complete. We are reminded of Isaiah's statement:

The Lord shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

– Isaiah 11:4

We are reminded also of Paul:

The Lord Jesus will destroy the lawless one with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.

– 2Thessalonians 2:8

¹In the New Testament the word 'saints' is used for the members of the Christian community. The reference in this text is to those special saints who have experienced the first resurrection. It is an indication of the early practice of venerating the saints. See, for example, the veneration given to Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, evidenced in *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp in Ancient Christian Writers* n.6 (NY: Newman Press, 1948).

²See 2:11; 20:6,14; 21:8.

³Genesis 10:2; Ezekiel 38:2; 39:6; 1Chronicles 1:5.

⁴The 'beloved city', see Psalm 78:68; 87:2.

⁵See 2 Kings 1:10; also Ezekiel 38:22; 39:6 re Gog.

The last judgment

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them.

¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

Also another book was opened, the book of life.

And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.

¹³And the sea gave up the dead that were in it,

Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done.

¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

This is the second death, the lake of fire;

¹⁵and anyone whose name was not found in the book of life, was thrown into the lake of fire.

This short scene depicts the final judgment, focusing on the consequences for those whose deeds show that they opposed the loving and redemptive action of God and his Christ in history.

The throne is white (1:14), identifying the one who sat upon it as the exalted Christ and God. There is no place in this scene for the earth and sky. Creation as it is cannot look on the face of God and remain the same. The dead are depicted as standing before the throne, awaiting judgment. We recall John's words:

The hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

– John 5:28-29

The books were opened: nothing anyone has done can be hidden from God who sees reality as it is and who cannot be deceived. He must judge things as they really are. The second book represents all that has been done in Christ in response to his inspiration. This is the book of life.¹

The sea (4:6) is linked with Death and Hades as symbols of negativity, chaos and the demonic. John is concerned here with all those who are not part of the first resurrection; that is to say, all those who have died and who have not been part of the activity of Christ in history, but have been forgotten in the invisible, shadowy existence associated with Hades.² Like Paul, John sees Death as the final enemy to be conquered.³

The judgment is just and in no way arbitrary. It is simply God's judgment, based on the data of people's decisions and actions.⁴ All are called to belong to Christ and to live as he lived in obedience to God's will. If people refuse to do this, and are obstinate in perpetrating evil, they will join Satan and all who incarnate Satan in their lives (19:20; 20:10) in the second death in the lake of fire.

¹3:15; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27. See also Daniel 12:1.

²Hebrew 'Sheol', the mythical place in the underworld to which the dead go prior to the final judgment.

³1Corinthians 15:26,54.

⁴Psalm 28:4; Sirach 16:12